Community Supported Agriculture in Alberta

Government of Alberta ■

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Definition

Community Supported Agriculture or Community Shared Agriculture (CSA) is a community of individuals or families who support a chosen farm and its family. Each individual or family purchases, in advance, a share, called a subscription, of the year's crop. Thus, the customers become virtual partners or 'co-producers' in the farm, sharing risk and reward with the farm family. Throughout the growing season, each week subscribing member receives equal shares of the freshly harvested food from the farmer.

Origins

CSAs have their philosophical roots in the writings of Austrian philosopher Rudolph Steiner, who formulated his educational and agricultural theories in the 1920s. Most important among the theories was the association of producers and consumers, where the consumer and producer are linked by their mutual interests. Ideally, this leads to an economy where what is produced locally is consumed locally.

The actual CSA farms originated in a number of regions around the globe – consumers and farmers formed community farms in Chile under the regime of Salvatore Allende in the early 1970s. The Chilean co-op movement inspired a Swiss farmer to start a community-based farm; and in the 1960s German consumers versed in Steiner's work were interested in founding an agriculture system that was ecologically sound and socially equitable. In Japan, mothers concerned about pesticide usage, the increase in imported food, and loss of arable land to encroachment by urban growth began similar subscription farming called teikei.

The idea spread to North America in 1986 with a farm in Oregon and another in New Hampshire; it has since spread inland from the coasts. According to the USDA's 2007 agriculture census report, released in 2009, there are currently 12,549 CSAs in operating in the USA, although exact numbers are hard to establish as many CSAs maintain a low, strictly local profile.

CSAs in Canada

According to Equiterre, the Quebec-based non-profit organization that works on social and environmental issues, 8,300 Quebecois families receive weekly baskets from 78 family farms.

In Ontario, more than 150 CSAs are listed by region on the Ontario CSA farm directory.

British Columbia's Farm Folk City Folk, a non-profit organization committed to supporting a local sustainable food system since 1993, lists 34 CSAs on its website.

Upwards of six CSAs are in existence in Saskatchewan, according to the Saskatchewan Organic Directorate and several credible food writers in the province.

Atlantic Canada Organic Regional Network, a non-profit organic food organization founded in 2000, lists fewer than 10 CSAs on its website.

At last count, 15 farms offer a CSA subscription in Alberta. This is a 500 per cent increase from three CSAs in 2008. Thus, most of the CSAs now in existence in Alberta have existed for fewer than three years.

It is important to remember that actual CSA numbers are in all likelihood higher than cited; as noted elsewhere in this report, CSAs tend to exist below-radar.

Best Practises & Quality

As a result of its geographic origins in Germany and Switzerland, many CSAs are farmed according to Steiner's biodynamic principles (see Appendix C details on Biodynamics). The majority of CSAs honour their origins and practice organic (certified or not) or holistic, ecologically-aware tillage and humane animal-tending methods. Two Albertan CSAs use animals – draft horse or oxen – to provide power instead of tractors. In most cases, animals are free-range or pastured.

Membership Rates & Variants

Farmers following CSA practices sell annual subscriptions to a set number of clients before the onset of spring. In nearly all cases, the previous year's clients are offered first refusal before new clients are solicited.

Share prices are consistent across the province. Full shares are suitable for a family of four and cost $500 to $600. Some farms offer half shares, suitable for two to three people, for slightly more money than half the cost of a full share ($300 to $350).

The number of subscriptions each farm offers varies widely. Some farms support as few as four families, while others support as many as 200. The provincial average is 40 to 50 families.

Some CSAs offer protein options, such as eggs or meat, which are available for an additional charge at time of enlistment.

Some CSA farms offer a reduced-rate membership for those who wish to regularly work on the farm – seeding, weeding, hoeing, watering, harvesting, fencing, building, and maintaining structures like greenhouses and packing sheds. Familiarizing subscribers to the farm is an underlying theme, but it takes a lot of planning and energy to organize and educate urban helpers.

Payment Options

Most CSAs require payment in full in March or earlier, to cover costs and provide farmers with income in the off-season. Some CSAs allow subscribers to divide their fee into several payments over the course of the year or season, as is mutually agreed. Very few CSAs take payment on a monthly basis. Cash and cheques are the most common methods of payment, a few use PayPal.

Duration Of Season

In Alberta, most CSAs canvass for subscribers in the winter months, the farmers then plan the crops and order seeds. Planting occurs (weather permitting) in May, although some crops are seeded in autumn (garlic) and others are successively seeded every two weeks (greens).

Weather permitting harvest begins in early June and most farms are able to offer 12 to 16 weeks of produce.

Delivery Options

Most farms organize one or more weekly central drop-off spot(s) – often at a farmers' market – in a nearby town or city where subscribers gather to collect their share of the week's yield. Some farms require subscribers to come to the farm to pick up their produce.

Member Solicitation

CSAs by definition are locally based. Farmers wishing to start a CSA canvass local residents by: email, websites, social media networks (Facebook and Twitter), client referrals from other CSAs and non-CSA farmers, word of mouth, posters at farmers' markets, and flyers. Mention in local print media increases visibility of CSAs; in some cases, memberships have filled completely after a newspaper article profiling local CSAs.

In general terms, CSAs remain a grassroots approach to farming, with no cohesive structure or national database. However, nearly every province in Canada does have a CSA listing, although not on government websites, and newly formed CSAs are encouraged to submit their names for inclusion on the list. However, as noted previously, not all CSAs are listed on these websites (see Appendix E for a website listing).

Farmers also try to maintain a database of members. Some farmers utilize Google Forms to set up and track their membership bases, schedules and participation. Others use Excel spreadsheets or simple hand-written lists.

Communication and Member Service

Nearly all CSAs have websites and/or blogs. CSA farmers usually email, blog or print a weekly newsletter for subscribers. These may include recipes for what is in season each week, storage tips for produce, stories about the farm and its residents, news of current activities, the farm's state of weather, and other affairs.

Frequently, during pick-ups, subscribers informally exchange recipes and cooking tips, and often establish relationships with the other subscribers. As subscribers learn who lives where, some organize car pools or take turns collecting the week's goods for each other where geography permits.

Typical Contents by Season

The majority of Alberta CSAs offer vegetables and fruit, usually all grown on the farm. What a farm grows is dictated by geography and the land, as well as a farmer's preferences.

Some CSAs act as co-operatives, bringing together a variety of food products from multiple farms so that subscribers have access to a wider array of foods over a longer season.

Some CSAs include meat, cheese, eggs, dairy products, grain, flowers, and pulses to supplement their vegetables. The occasional CSA specializes, offering only cheese, meats, dairy, grain, etc.

In early spring (late May-June) baskets may include rhubarb, asparagus, peas, herbs, nettles, radishes, green onions, lettuces, and other quick-growing greens.

July baskets change from week to week as produce comes into and goes out of season. A normal basket would include chard, herbs, summer squash, lettuce, spinach, greens, tomatoes, new potatoes, early beets or beet tops, berries, cucumbers, and peas.

In August, the produce shifts to hot weather plants such as: hardy greens, squash, tomatoes, herbs, beets, broccoli, carrots, chard, rhubarb, radishes, beans, cauliflower, and berries.

September sees the arrival of corn, apples, peppers, squash, pumpkins, celery, onions, rutabagas, winter squash, chard, and garlic; along with more potatoes, herbs, and tomatoes. Some growers seed successively so that crops are available for longer times.

In October, hardy greens may continue, along with root vegetables – beets, carrots, turnips, rutabagas, potatoes, onions, and garlic.

Some CSAs may preserve some of their goods by freezing, canning, or drying for distribution in later months.

Unique Events

Some CSA arrangements require on-farm labour by subscribers. One or more work days may be a requirement for each family. Seeding, weekly picking, weeding and end of season clean-up are some of the ways subscribers provide on-farm assistance.

Others offer an annual optional 'farm visit day' to their subscribers, with or without a labour component, usually including a meal.

Both options give urban residents a chance to see the garden, the animals, and the farm itself. Some farms may also offer lessons in animal husbandry, driving draft animals, harvesting, and preserving.

Advantages

CSAs could simplify a farmer's life. They reduce the need for farmers to spend a lot of time, effort, and expense on learning how to market, package, label, and distribute their food.

CSAs minimize the time and risk inherent in attending farmers' markets.

CSAs give the farmer a guaranteed market and the knowledge of exactly how much produce to package each week.

A CSA farmer knows who is eating the food grown on the land, forming a basis of community.

Funds are provided by subscribers in advance of the planting season, allowing the farmer to buy seeds, maintain or build structures, repair equipment, and to cover living costs in the off-season.

The consumer knows how the food is grown and what, if any, substances are used in its production.

Each subscriber receives a set share of the harvest, whatever is ripe and ready, on a weekly basis.

CSA subscribers may, in most cases, visit the farm and get some sunshine and soil on their hands.

Subscribers' food is seasonal, fresh, and has not traveled very far.

CSA members regain a measure of control over their local food supply.

In Alberta food produced on CSA farms is consumed on average within 120 kilometers of where it was grown, requiring a minimum of transportation costs.

Most CSAs are organic, natural, or biodynamic so the chemical input load on local land is reduced.

CSAs keep farmers on the land, growing food for local consumers. They are an integral part of a local foods infrastructure.

CSAs offer opportunities for learning new skills – food preservation, animal husbandry, care and usage of draft animals, and sustainable gardening.

Disadvantages

CSAs must be close to a large population to attract clients. As a result, CSAs are mostly situated in densely populated parts of the province where agricultural land is at a premium.

When a particular food is in season it's in abundance; when the season concludes that crop is no longer available. From July through September, subscribers may have more Swiss chard in succession than they appreciate. Some CSAs turn this into a positive for their other members by setting up a Swap Box.

If the weather is unkind or untimely, crops may fail to germinate, thrive, set blossom, grow, or set fruit. Plants may also freeze, drown, or dehydrate. Chickens may stop laying, cows may go dry, or lambs may not thrive. These are all part of the risk the farmer has always borne, so the CSA subscriber bears it too and gets as much or as little as Mother Nature provides.

Subscribers must, in most cases, pay for membership in advance.

If a subscriber fails to collect the week's allotment, the farmer must have a plan in place to utilize it. Some farmers institute strict pick up times and use farmers' markets as their pick up sites; any shares left uncollected after a set time are sold to the public, given to organizations that feed the disadvantaged, or divided among other members.

The week's goods must be cleaned and divided into as many bags or boxes as there are shares. This may entail initiating a bag recycling program with subscribers, or purchasing twice the number of boxes as subscribers so that one is always at the farm for filling.

Planning on-farm events and subscriber work days takes a lot of planning and energy to organize.

For food safety reasons, any value-added processing must be done in an approved and certified commercial kitchen.

Average weekly CSA costs (about $40) to subscribers may be more or less than a family's pre-existing supermarket produce budget, depending on their shopping habits. CSA buyers appreciate knowing the source and practices of the grower and this may outweigh any cost differential for the subscriber.

CSA net income for farmers is variable, and in many cases insufficient to support a family, many hold an off-farm job to supplement their farming income.

Variations

Some growers form Collaborative CSAs, where several farm families join forces to offer a wider variety of products, a longer season, or a steadier supply. This also allows families to share the responsibility for taking the week's shares to the drop-off point.

Some CSAs supply some fraction of their goods to buying clubs or brown box programs. Such clubs or co-ops typically operate in one location, often a house or behind the scenes of a member's business. They acquire local produce and products for members, and usually charge a membership fee in addition to whatever members order. Ordering is often done online or by email.

Another variant is a direct sales version where customers are not subscribers, but pre-order online or via email on a regular schedule (weekly or bi-weekly) and pick up their orders at a pre-set central location.

Summary

CSAs focus on the production of high quality foods for a local community. A great degree of consumer involvement results in a stronger consumer-producer relationship. The process develops a cohesive community willing to fund a whole season's budget. The more a farm embraces 'whole-farm, whole-budget support,' the more it can focus on quality and reduce the risk of food waste or financial loss.

Appendices

Appendix A

Customer Service & Best Practices For CSA Farmers

- **Talk to other CSA farmers for advice.**
  Ask those who have already done it. Find a mentor or apprentice at a CSA or market garden first to see if it suits you. Look outside your region to reduce your risk of competition. Experiment with your desired crops (if new to you) a season in advance to test for taste and compatibility with climate and geography.
- **Start small.**
  Start with a small subscriber group. Experiment to find a manageable cropping plan. Understand the difference between farming and gardening; make sure you can manage multiple crops before increasing shares.
- **Start with enough capital.**
  Don't expect to make money from the start.
- **Have another source of income.**
- **Have long-term access to land close to an urban centre.**
- **Do not under-estimate the workload.**
  Enlist labour: family, friends, and World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms subscribers.
- **Be prepared to work very hard.**
  It takes time to develop a CSA client list. Your customers can become your best recruiters. Members can assist in distribution, harvesting, and outreach. Consider setting up compulsory work as part of every share (for example, three days a season for a full share, two days for a half share). Consider offering working shares for a reduced rate; offer learning opportunities, such as how to preserve food, principles of organic growing; link work with social activities, such as "weed & feed" or a work bee followed by a meal.
- **Delegate what you can.**
  Rely on members for help with heavy workloads and subscriber outreach. Or consider set up a rotating committee of subscribers to coordinate orders and drop-off sites.
- **Think before you dig.**
  Research consumer interest before starting. Proximity to a large urban centre is essential for sufficient customer interest. Transportation can become costly in time and money. If members live at a distance, on-farm participation may be limited. Target 25- to 35-year olds with children as the prime subscriber candidates.
- **Spread yourself around and have backup sales outlets.**
  Grow excess veggies with some backup form of marketing for excess: farmers' markets, farm gate sales, local retailers, or buying clubs.
- **Try to carry on through the winter.**
  In Alberta, as across Canada, the CSA season is no more than four months on average. Grow vegetables that store well for autumn/winter subscribers. Consider selling to members on a separate pay-to-play basis in winter. Investigate value-added options: canning, drying herbs, flowers, and freezing.

- **Consider co-operation.**
  Consider buying from or exchanging goods/services with other farmers to supplement losses. Or share your membership base with several farms to form a collaborative CSA to reduce the risk of crop failure and lower the stress of growing many crops.
- **Over-deliver.**
  Be generous. Limit customer numbers until you know you can meet customers' needs and more. A waiting list of interested buyers is preferable to even one dis-satisfied client.
- **Adjust to circumstances.**
  There are always fluctuations in growing. Try to foresee where and what challenges might arise and plan a response in advance. Remember to seed rapid-growth, short-season crops at successive intervals to ensure a longer season. Be prepared to teach your subscribers and remember that teaching is slower than doing.
- **Keep learning.**
  Attend field days, conferences, and workshops and learn from others in the industry.
- **Share what you know.**
  Mentor another grower. Educate your subscribers. Keep them apprised of weather, yield, ups and downs, and changes in delivery schedules. Give them tips on storage. Find good recipes for your produce and share them.

Appendix B

Best Practices for CSA Subscribers

- Do not quibble about or attempt to negotiate a CSA farmer's rate.
- Pay promptly when your contract stipulates.
- Sign up for work days and show up when you say you will.
- Collect each week's produce promptly. Arrange for a friend to collect if you are unable to.
- Express interest. Offer thoughtful and respectful feedback on quality and quantity of goods.
- Adjust to circumstances. Accept that farming and gardening have no sure outcomes.
- Share what you know. Offer favourite and tested recipes to subscribers and farmer.
- Consider co-operation. Organize ride shares and car pools to collect the week's share.
- Educate yourself about farming practises. Read your farmer's blog, website, email or flyer. Respond.
- Express your appreciation for your farmer's hard work and results.
- Visit the farm beyond scheduled work days. Be sure to call and ask for permission, farms are busy places. Offer help. Take along a gift of food (made from the farm's produce) to show your gratitude.
- Recycle CSA boxes or return them promptly.
- Do not waste food. If your share is too generous or you have to leave town, share.

Appendix C

Biodynamics

Biodynamics is believed to be the modern era's oldest non-chemical agricultural movement. One of the main principles of biodynamic farming is that the farm, like a human, is viewed and treated as a whole, a self-sustaining organism. Austrian philosopher Rudolph Steiner, writing in the 1920s, advocated companion planting and crop rotation, but also more common practices like sowing and harvesting according to the lunar calendar, and esoterica such as the use of minute applications of homoeopathic-style infusions of mineral, plant or manure extracts to heal and revitalize the soil. Biodynamics has a global following, with participating groups and members mostly concentrated in Europe. A trademark, Demeter, named for the ancient goddess of the earth, is used to indicate certified farms where biodynamic principles are followed.

Appendix D

Books & DVDS

Our Field: A Manual for Community Shared Agriculture, 1994, by Tamsyn Rowley and Chris Beeman (University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario)

Basic Formula to Create Community Supported Agriculture by Robin Van En (Indian Line Farm, Box 57, Jugend Road, Great Barrington, MA 02130)

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA): Making the Connection by Bill Blake et. al. (UC Cooperative Extension, Attn: CSA Handbook, 11477 E Avenue, Auburn, CA 95603)

Farms of Tomorrow Revisited: Community Supported Farms - Farm Supported Communities by Trauger Groh and Steven McFadden (Biodynamic Farming & Gardening Association)

Sharing the Harvest: A Citizen's Guide to Community Supported Agriculture by Elizabeth Henderson, with Robyn Van En, revised and expanded (Chelsea Green Publishing Company)

Farmer John's Cookbook: The Real Dirt on Vegetables by Farmer John Peterson and Angelic Organics (Gibbs Smith, Publisher)

DVD: The Real Dirt on Farmer John directed by Taggart Siegel (available at libraries and stores)

DVD: It's Not Just About Vegetables co-produced by Mickey Friedman, John MacGruer, and Jan VanderTuin (available online, at libraries and in stores)

Appendix E

Related Websites & Resources

- Organic Alberta – www.organicalberta.ca
- Explore Local Initiative – www.explorelocal.ca
- Farm Folk City Folk – www.ffcf.ca
- CSA Alberta – www.csaalberta.com
- Curious Cook – www.curiouscook.net
- Ontario CSA Farm Directory – www.csafarms.ca
- CSA - Biodynamics Farming and Gardening – www.biodynamics.com/canada.html
- Atlantic Canadian Organic Regional Network – www.acornorganic.org
- Equiterre – www.equiterre.org
- It's Not Just About Vegetables – www.itsnotjustaboutvegetables.com
- Angelic Organics – www.angelic-organics.com
- Acres USA – A voice for Eco- Agriculture – www.acresusa.com